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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES PROTESTANT ISSUES IN THREE NORTHERN PROVINCES; VISITS BAPTISTS IN BAC GIANG AND ETHNIC MINORITY PROTESTANTS IN LANG SON

REF: A) HANOI 1877; B) HANOI 1678; C) HANOI 1466; D) HANOI 1113; E)

HANOI 1112

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11. (SBU) Summary and Comment: During a July 5-7 provincial outreach trip, the Ambassador discussed Protestant issues with the leaders of Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang and Lang Son provinces. Thai Nguyen officials were open-minded about the issue of registration, but tightlipped about their future plans. In Bac Giang, the Ambassador was able to meet with a handful of Baptists belonging to a controversial congregation in one district, despite a clumsy attempt by local officials to steer him toward meeting with disgruntled traditionalist relatives of the Baptists. It is not likely that the congregation will be registered any time soon and their leader may be arrested for debt. In Lang Son, by comparison a model province on religious freedom, the Ambassador visited a well-established, registered Protestant church in a Dzao community, and also met with the leader of a H'mong church that is seeking registration. This trip reinforces our impression that implementation of the GVN's policy to register Protestants and facilitate worship in the north varies widely from province to province. In the coming months, we will press the GVN to force other more recalcitrant northern provinces to move toward the Lang Son approach. End Summary and Comment.

THAI NGUYEN LEADERSHIP

12. (SBU) On July 5, the Ambassador met with Thai Nguyen Provincial People's Committee (PPC) Chairman Nguyen Van Kim. Following a discussion of Catholic issues (Ref A), Kim noted that "a number of residents" follow Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) Protestantism in Thai Nguyen. (Note: The ECVN reports that there are 1,500 total Kinh, Dzao and H'mong believers, comprising eighteen separate congregations, in the province. End Note). The PPC is currently providing instructions to the Protestants on how to practice their religion "without causing economic hardship." Protestantism is a new phenomenon in Thai Nguyen, but the PPC is aware of the PM's Instruction on Protestantism, and if followers practice their faith in accordance with the GVN's legal framework on religion, they "probably will not have any problems to register their congregations." (Note: The Chairman made no mention of a provincial pilot project to register Protestants despite the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs' suggestion that such a program might be underway in Thai Nguyen - Ref C. Following up after the Ambassador's discussion, Poloff was told that Thai Nguyen has a plan to register six ECVN congregations by October or November, but provincial officials have refused to comment further on this plan despite repeated requests for more information. End Note.)

13. (SBU) On July 6, the Ambassador met with Bac Giang PPC Chairman Than Van Muu. In addition to other issues discussed, Muu noted that the Baptist congregation in Song Mai Commune (Ref B) comprises only 17 individuals, according to a list submitted by Pastor Than Van Truong. (Note: Truong is a long time advocate of religious freedom in Vietnam. He was committed by the GVN to a mental institution in July 2004, after sending letters to provincial officials calling on them to abandon Communist teachings and follow Christian scripture instead. He was released on September 17, 2005 after reportedly signing a document acknowledging a mental illness. Since his release, Truong has strenuously advocated religious freedom over GVN objections. End Note). This is in stark contrast to the large Buddhist (150,000) and Catholic (17,000) populations in the province. The Ambassador noted that the registration of Protestant groups like Truong's congregation is very important for our bilateral relationship. Officials, especially at the local level, need to allow people to worship as they please, in accordance with GVN law and policies. The number of Protestants in Bac Giang may be small, but the law does not say their congregation has to be big to be legal. Problems like those in Song Mai are hurting the public image of Vietnam. If provincial and district officials facilitate the Baptists' ability to worship, the international community will applaud, but if they hinder that freedom, the international community will not react well, the Ambassador said.

14. (SBU) Muu admitted that he and his staff do not know much about Protestantism, but he asserted that the GVN respects the rights of all Vietnamese to worship as they please. "You also need to trust our reports of religious freedom...if you receive reports of incidents from other sources, be suspicious," he added. The Baptists in Song Mai all come from one clan. Part of the clan follows traditional (ancestor worship) beliefs. Part of the current conflict in the commune stems from family friction between the traditionalists and the Baptists. "In fact, I am from the same clan as Pastor Truong and some other members of the clan are local

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officials as well," Muu said. (Note: Than is the clan name for both Muu and Truong. End Note). He also asserted that the intra-clan conflict may be seen by outsiders as a problem between local officials and believers, but really "there is no local government effort to prohibit religion in Bac Giang." In conclusion, Muu noted that the PPC plans to arrest Truong soon over the issue of his debts (Ref B). The Ambassador noted that we will continue to monitor Truong's and the Baptists' situation closely, and we hope that any legal action against Truong follows the same laws, procedures and standards under which any other Vietnamese would be prosecuted.

SONG MAI COMMUNE

15. (SBU) In the afternoon, the Ambassador visited Song Mai Commune and met with the Chairman of the People's Committee, Mr. Do Van Bao, and a commune representative of the Vietnam Fatherland Front's Veterans Association. Bao noted that the PPC had instructed him to introduce the Ambassador to ten people named by Truong as members of his church in an official list submitted along with the Baptist's application to register. The commune arranged for that group to meet at the cultural center (a one-room building) in Song Mai. "Truong wanted to meet with you too, but since he is not a legal resident here it would not be safe for him to meet you," Bao said. The Ambassador thanked Bao for arranging the meeting, but reiterated his request to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hoe, the owners of the house in which the Baptist congregation regularly meets for worship. Bao claimed that Hoe and his wife were among those invited to the culture center. (Note: The Hoes told us by phone that they refused to meet with the Ambassador at the culture center. End Note.)

16. (SBU) Bao introduced six elderly individuals as Baptists, noting that they were all listed as such on Truong's application. All of them proved to be Buddhist septuagenarian relatives of Truong, and most had little understanding of the questions put to them regarding Protestantism. The one exception was a man (NFI) in his early 40's

who stated that Truong is his cousin. He appeared at the culture center because the local officials informed him he was on the list of Baptists Truong submitted with his application. "I was very surprised that Truong has brought Protestantism here...I and my family don't agree with him and most people here worship their ancestors according to tradition" the man said.

¶7. (SBU) In the face of this meager presentation, the Ambassador insisted that Bao allow him to visit the Hoe household (which is located just behind the culture center), and talk to the Baptists directly. After a brief attempt to prevent the Ambassador to visit the home on the grounds that local officials could not guarantee his safety, Bao relented under orders from the PPC religious affairs representative. Mr. and Mrs. Hoe, Pastor Truong and his wife greeted the Ambassador at the locked door to their compound. Hoe's wife also showed the Ambassador the small bedroom and chapel on the second floor that is used for prayer meetings. Hoe stated that the group only wants to follow religion under the GVN's framework on religion. At this point the man claiming to be Truong's cousin forced his way into the chapel and crudely accosted Hoe's and Truong's wives in Vietnamese. Truong's wife lost her temper at the extreme insult and began shoving the cousin. As the Ambassador left the building, the two wrestled physically and verbally on the stairs while Bao tried to separate them bodily.

LANG SON

¶8. (SBU) On July 7, the Ambassador met with Lang Son PPC Chairman Doan Ba Nhien. Following a discussion of Catholic issues (Ref A), Nhien noted that "in Lang Son, we are trying to work in line with Vietnam's Constitution" with regard to Protestants. The ECVN congregation of Dzao Protestants in Bac Son District was formed in ¶1938. It existed as separate group until it joined the ECVN as a single congregation. The Ambassador complimented the PPC on its enlightened approach to Protestants as well as Catholics and encouraged Nhien to assist the ethnic H'mong group in Bac Son to register their congregation as well in the spirit of the PM's Instruction on Protestantism. (Note: The ECVN reports that the H'mong group in Bac Son comprises 292 individuals who first submitted an application to register with district officials in June ¶2005. The congregation re-submitted their application in January, ¶2006. End Note.)

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador visited the ECVN house church in Suoi Nay Village of Tan Tri Commune in Bac Son later in the afternoon. The district is three hours from Lang Son City by car and the village is accessible via a new, six kilometer (km) road off the main road to the boundary with Thai Nguyen Province, which is only eight miles beyond the village turn off. The village is reached by a two km dirt track that winds through rice paddies and crosses several

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streams with makeshift electrical turbines powered by the water. The church is a stilt house with a large front room kitted out with mats, a pulpit, several fans and a large electronic organ. Unlike the members of other ECVN house churches visited by Embassy staff in the North (Refs D and E), church members were not wearing ethnic costumes. The Ambassador met with Pastor Ly Tien Luu, who explained that the 1,500 followers (308 households) of the Dzao church in Lang Son are divided into twelve sub-congregations. Each group gathers in structures in other areas of Bac Son District. Each house holds about 120 people on Sundays, but more people attend Christmas and Easter services. There is a management board for each sub-congregation. With the exception of Pastor Luu who studied with ECVN in Hanoi, the deacons leading each group have not had any formal training, Luu Said.

¶10. (SBU) Luu stated that this congregation is still growing and has asked local officials for permission to build an actual church in Suoi Nay. The local government has agreed in principle with this request, but the group has not yet completed all of the paperwork to proceed with the building project. The congregation hopes to eventually build churches for all 12 sub-congregations as well. Since the promulgation of the GVN's Ordinance on Religion in 2004, the religious life of the Bac Son congregation has "become normal."

The group even is allowed to worship in Dzao language using Dzao materials and bibles provided by ECVN, although Luu also preaches in Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) when local officials are present. The church has also organized social groups for small children, primary school students, teenagers, adults and elderly members of the church, Luu said with quiet pride.

¶11. (SBU) Luu also introduced the Ambassador to Ly Van Sung, who is the deacon of the unregistered H'mong congregation in Bac Son. Luu noted that the H'mong Protestants emigrated to Bac Son in 2000 from other areas of the north. The local authorities encouraged us to reach out to this new group to help them establish their new congregation, Luu said. Sung noted that the H'mong congregation of 34 households has still not received permission to register. Their house church is 40km from Suoi Nay (about an hour by motorbike). When the group first arrived from Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang, Bac Kan, and Cao Bang provinces, Bac Son District officials did not allow them to practice their religion, but since the PM's Instruction, and especially in 2006, local officials have gradually allowed the group to worship, Sung explained.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) This trip reinforces our impression that implementation of the GVN's policy to register Protestants and facilitate worship in the north varies widely from province to province. In Thai Nguyen, the PPC is open-minded but tight-lipped about plans for registrations. In Bac Giang, local officials seem quite unhappy by the advent of Truong's Baptists and determined to resist their development, not to mention their registration, despite our and the international community's attention. (This may have more to do with "Pastor" Truong than with the handful of Baptist practitioners in Song Mai Commune). Lang Son, on the other hand, is a model for what we would like to see in a provincial government's approach to religious freedom, though this owes much to the long tradition of religion in the province. In the coming months, we will press the GVN to force other more recalcitrant northern provinces to move toward the Lang Son approach.

MARINE